

# THINK OF THE CHILDREN

THE YOUNG—AND  
FUTURE GENERATIONS  
—DRIVE U.S. CLIMATE  
CONCERN



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# Survey findings in brief



**THREE-FOURTHS OF AMERICANS (74%) FEEL THEY HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE BY ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE NOT ONLY FOR THEIR OWN CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN BUT ALSO FOR ALL CHILDREN TO COME.**

- Nearly half (46%) of the respondents *least* concerned about climate change agree with the moral obligation to address climate change when thinking about children.
- Our survey found that people of color are more climate conscious and more concerned for children: 81% of Black and 83% of Latino respondents were very or somewhat concerned that climate change will impact children in their lifetime compared to 70% of White respondents.
- Four out of five respondents (82%) believe that children will be essential in fighting climate change and that we must give them the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world.
- Yet there is still a high level of silence about climate change between generations. Only about half of parents with children (49%) say they have talked with their children about it.

# Introduction

The efforts of today's children and youth will be critical to protecting and healing our planet. Scientists  have made clear that the impacts of climate change and the need to take action will continue for decades. The youngest members of society are already experiencing the effects of the climate crisis.  Heat, air pollution, and extreme weather harm health, development, and school readiness, especially from the prenatal period through the critical first five years. For older children and youth , climate change is disrupting schools and taking a severe toll on mental health.

Taking action on climate change can help young people to engage civically, find compelling life paths in the clean economy, and create healthy, thriving, and sustainable communities.

This Is Planet Ed  (an initiative of the Aspen Institute) and Capita  commissioned a survey on the state of public opinion in the United States on climate change, particularly as it affects children and future generations. We sought to better understand whether keeping children in mind can strengthen support for both systemic and policy change and influence personal choices that support a sustainable future.

The survey was carried out by the Siena College Research Institute, an affiliate of Siena College, in Loudonville, New York. In all, there were 2042 online interviews with U.S. residents over 18. The survey was conducted August 18-22, 2022.

## 01 —

### Why we did this survey now

With both the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, the federal government has pledged unprecedented investments to transform our country's energy policy and reduce carbon emissions. This summer again brought intensifying climate-fueled extreme weather globally, from floods to droughts, wildfires to hurricanes, underscoring what's at stake.

Meeting and exceeding U.S. targets for reducing emissions will depend on Americans capitalizing on newly available opportunities and acting in their communities. And to act, people need to be motivated, including those who aren't yet worried about climate change and its impacts.

In this survey, participants see climate change as a problem that particularly affects children. They believe young people need the knowledge and skills to cope. And they feel a moral obligation to do something about climate change for the sake of young people.

Concern for children's well-being can be a uniquely powerful moral and ethical motivator. We wanted to see how a shared concern about children and youth could help provide opportunities for common ground across different groups of Americans.

Another impetus for commissioning this survey was to understand how climate is already affecting families and the current state of conversations about climate between caregivers and children.

Recent studies  suggest that young people are the most distressed about the climate crisis of any generation. Parents and caregivers  are best positioned to talk to children about these fears and other difficult emotions. Dialogue  about climate change tied to climate solutions can help spur action and reduce eco-anxiety. Understanding the extent to which this communication is already occurring can help us build resources and tools to support productive conversations.

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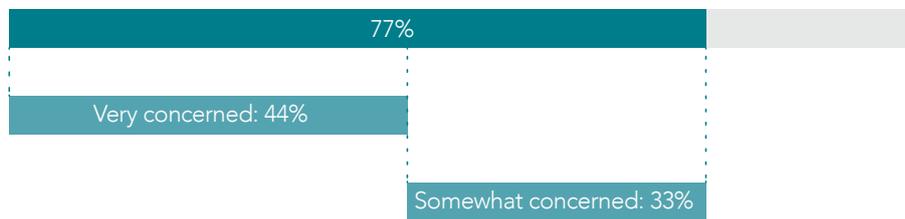


# The Findings

## 01 —

### Three-fourths say climate change is a problem

Respondents expressed **high levels of concern about the climate crisis**. In particular, **77%** said that climate change is a very (44%) or somewhat (33%) serious problem.



And, notably, **67%** agreed that **climate change is harming people** now or will do so in the next few years.



A slightly lower percentage, **63%**, were very (27%) or somewhat (36%) concerned that **climate change will harm them personally** at some point in their lifetime.



What's more, people are especially alarmed for their children and future generations. Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the impact of climate change on young people is very serious.

Colleen was interviewed for the survey; she lives in rural Oregon. "Unless we turn this ship around, we're screwed," she said. "Raising food is going to be a lot more expensive and just having a warmer atmosphere is going to cause all kinds of storms and different things going on."

## 02 \_\_\_\_\_

### **People of color are more climate conscious and more concerned for children**

In our survey, women, parents, people of color, and people from the western or northeastern United States were slightly more concerned than others about climate.

Specifically, 85% of Black and 83% of Latino respondents think climate change is a very or somewhat serious problem. Just 73% of White Americans said the same. The Yale Center for Climate Communication  has found a similar gap.

These elevated concerns may be related to the greater likelihood that communities of color are experiencing effects of climate change. Due to a history of policies increasing segregation of neighborhoods, including redlining, communities of color are more likely to experience high heat, flooding, and air pollution. In the survey, 75% of Black respondents and 71% of Latino respondents indicated they were very or somewhat concerned that climate change will impact them personally in their lifetime, compared to 57% of White respondents.

When also asked about whether climate change will personally harm children over the course of their lifetime, 81% of Black respondents and 81% of Latino respondents were very or somewhat concerned, compared to 70% of White respondents.

## 03 \_\_\_\_\_

### **Even the least-concerned Americans do “think of the children”**

For the purposes of comparing responses across various items, we grouped respondents by their degree of concern over climate. Overall, approximately two-thirds of respondents fell into a very concerned group, while one-third were less concerned.

The distance between these two groups was measured by their responses to items such as:

- “the effects of climate change are likely to be catastrophic”  
(66% agreed, 25% disagreed)
- “the evidence for climate change is undeniable”  
(72% agreed, 23% disagreed)

We found that thinking about children and future generations caused a strong response even among the less-concerned third of respondents.

For example, across those interviewed, 74% agreed that they have a moral obligation to make the world a better place by addressing climate change not only for their own children and grandchildren but also for all children to come. Of those with children in the household, a higher percentage, 80%, agreed. Among those most concerned about climate change, the feeling was nearly universal—89%.

And crucially, even among the one-third of respondents least concerned about climate change, 46% agreed with this same statement.

Significantly, this subgroup was not very concerned about climate change for themselves. They might even be doubtful about whether it is caused by humans. But nearly half were still concerned and did still recognize an obligation to address climate change—that is, when it comes to their own children, grandchildren, and future generations.

This finding suggests a path forward to successful climate communication that creates common ground across divided groups of Americans.

Lisa lives in central Virginia and has five grandchildren. She said she’s politically middle-of-the-road and “moderately concerned” about climate change. But she does see the weather getting more unpredictable, and she worries about her grandkids not getting enough time outside.

“Who wants to spend their lives inside air conditioning constantly? Everything is like a little bubble and I see that as something that’s different [from when I was growing up]. My concern is that people just won’t be able to enjoy nature like they should be able to.”

**“Who wants to spend their lives inside air conditioning constantly? My concern is that people just won’t be able to enjoy nature like they should be able to.”**

Lisa, respondent



## 04 \_\_\_\_\_

**Children, and education, should be part of the solution**

When it comes to the climate, children and young people aren't only seen as uniquely vulnerable or constituting a moral imperative for action.

The people we surveyed also viewed young people as part of the solution.

- More than three-fourths of all respondents agreed that the climate agenda in the U.S., needs to prioritize the well-being of children. This was true for respondents with children in their home (79%) as well as those without (75%).



82%

- More than three-fourths (**82%**) of all respondents **agreed that children will be essential in fighting climate change** and that we must give them the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world.

This finding represents a broad consensus about supporting children in developing the knowledge and skills necessary to advance a sustainable world.

Schools are a powerful lever for this change. Recently, New Jersey [↔](#) became the first state in the union to require all its public schools to teach about climate change across most subject areas. This commitment is far from universal. As of 2020, 29 states and Washington, DC [↔](#), require teaching human-caused climate change in science classes and five states require teaching human-caused climate change in social studies.

Lisa in Virginia said she is “moderately concerned” about climate. She was, however, fully in favor of incorporating climate information into learning standards for what kids should know in school.

“I think it would be a good idea to learn about it, and I think that there’s ways to teach it without being political,” she said. “There are standards of learning about the water cycle, weather...you could easily fit climate into these science topics. ‘If you put too much carbon dioxide, this is what you’re going to get.’ It’s not a complicated subject.”

She pointed out that science classes often cover topics where there is evolving knowledge.

“We decide what the curriculum should be. So I don’t see why it shouldn’t be taught. They teach about dinosaurs and things like that and meteorites that happened millions of years ago where we don’t know exactly what happened. We’re not 100% sure and we teach about it—so why not climate?”

## 05 \_\_\_\_\_

### Families are talking about it—and they want to take action

We asked the parents with children under 18 to tell us about their family conversations on this topic. We found a split, with slightly fewer than half of these respondents engaging in these conversations right now.

- About half of parents with children, 49%, said they have talked with their children about climate change.

This is a significant percentage, showing that this concern is front and center for many families. However, it's notably lower than the 82% who thought we must give children "the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world." Future research should explore the reasons behind this gap. Do parents feel unqualified to teach their children what they need to know? Are they waiting until their children are older? Do they not know how to start the conversation?

Parul, in northern California, is the mother of an 11-year-old son. She's become increasingly concerned about climate and has deliberately decided to engage her son on the topic. "My hope is as he grows and matures he'll start caring about it. He'll bring it up to his peers and his teachers."

- Of those with children, 41% said that their children have asked them to explain things to them about climate change, pollution, or the environment.

**"My hope is as he grows and matures he'll start caring about it. He'll bring it up to his peers and his teachers."**

Parul, mother of an 11-year-old son



This points, again, to an opportunity to expand access to high-quality educational and media materials to support informed and productive dialogue between parents and children. This also continues to highlight the opportunity for schools to support these conversations.

Parul tried to start the climate conversation with her son by playing him podcasts intended for adults, which he found “boring.” “Beautiful” nature documentaries like those hosted by David Attenborough were more engaging. “I kept talking about it in whatever the context was and now he’s very aware and he’s talking about it on his own.”

- Of those with children, 46% have spoken to their family about changes or sacrifices they think they as a family should make to fight climate change.

This is the crucial step: where awareness and education lead to behavior change and solutions.

Pete is a father of two teenage daughters in Rockland County, NY, and for years he’s tried to demonstrate his concern for climate and the environment to them through everyday action. “We eat a lot less meat. We have solar panels on the house and two electric cars. We compost. We volunteer, cleaning up litter.”

**“I want them to be really conscious and concerned and have it part of their lifestyle and even career choices.”**

**Pete, father of two teenage daughters**

**Resource - Climate Advocacy Toolkit:** to help parents advance action on climate change in their local school districts, This Is Planet Ed, in partnership with National PTA and Mothers Out Front, has released a Parent Advocacy Toolkit. [↪](#)

**Early Years Climate Task Force:** Capita and This is Planet Ed are convening a Task Force established to develop the first ever U.S Action Plan supporting the early years sector in building resilience to climate impacts and taking climate action. It is co-chaired by Diana Rauner, former First Lady of Illinois and President of Start Early, and Antwanne Ford, President and CEO, Enlightened, Inc. and Chair, District of Columbia Workforce Investment Council. The Task Force includes 19 other distinguished representatives from the education and health sectors, current and former elected officials in state and Tribal government, parent leaders, and early childhood advocates. [↪](#)

## 06 —

### Children are concerned, and they're talking about it

Our survey revealed that the conversations between parents and children aren't only being initiated by parents.

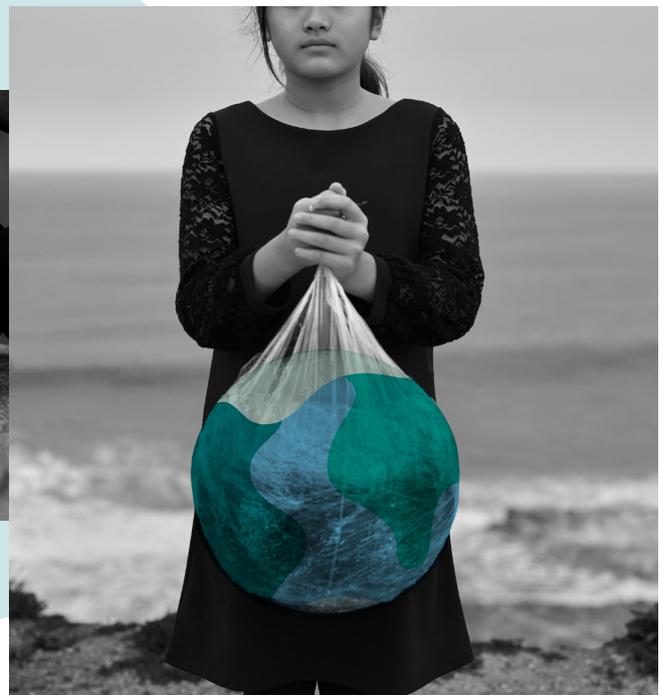
- Three in 10 respondents with children said their children have told them they worry about climate change.

Each conversation between parent and child is an opportunity for public opinion to shift in the direction of meaningful change. In 2019, research in *Nature Climate Change* [↪](#) highlighted these kinds of conversations as a pathway to motivate more parents toward being engaged and concerned about climate.

It's also important to acknowledge the level of worry that children are bringing home to their families about climate change and the impacts of climate change on young people's mental health. Do parents know what to say? How can they allay these concerns? As we increase talk and action on climate change, it will be essential to support families in handling appropriate and sensitive conversations.

Pete rated his level of alarm about the climate as very high: "as concerned as one can be." But he hasn't tried to pass that along to his girls. He struggles to find the balance between raising their awareness and burdening them with anxiety. He doesn't feel that their school is doing enough to integrate the message, either.

"They're pretty ignorant and I think part of it might be because I haven't chosen to be a doomer with them. I just can't bear to." Ideally, he said, "I want them to be really conscious and concerned and have it part of their lifestyle and even career choices."



# This survey in context

We were finishing up our analysis as Hurricane Ian menaced Florida, just after Hurricane Fiona had knocked out power to Puerto Rico, and coming off yet another summer of new heat records, drought, fires, and floods. Our survey comes in the context of other studies that have looked at general concern about climate, climate anxiety among youth, and the role of education in spurring action.

Overall, our responses, with three out of four people expressing concern about the climate, are in line with other recent surveys, although findings vary by how the questions are phrased.

- In 2021, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication  found that 72% of U.S. adults think global warming is happening. But 71% think it will harm future generations, while just 47% think it will harm “me personally.”
- In 2022, the Pew Research Center  found that 75% of respondents across 19 countries view global climate change as a “major threat” to their country— but that figure was just 54% in the U.S.
- Gallup  found in 2022 that 71% worry “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about the quality of the environment.
- A 2022 survey from NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health  found that firsthand experience was the key. Adults who had been personally affected by extreme weather events in the past five years were more likely to see climate change in the United States as a crisis or a major problem (77%) compared with those who had not been affected by such events (46%). The personally affected group was more likely to favor government-led climate actions and policies.

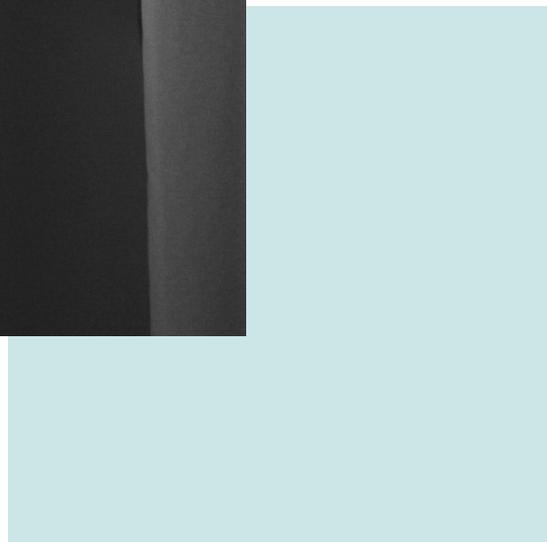
In our survey, three in 10 respondents with children said their children had told them they were worried about climate change. Other studies suggest that these worries among young people are severe and becoming more widespread, even ubiquitous, as children emerge into young adulthood.

- A paper published in 2021 in *The Lancet* , the British medical journal, shared the results of a 10-country survey of 10,000 young people between 16 and 25 years old. Of this large group, 84% said they were at least moderately worried about climate; of those, 59% were “extremely worried.” And, even more upsetting, 45%, or close to half, said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning.
- In 2022, a nationwide survey  of Gen Z Americans (ages 14-24) by Blue Shield California similarly found heavy impacts. Three of four said they had experienced a mental health issue, such as anxiety, stress, or feelings of being overwhelmed, as a result of consuming news about climate change.

The gap between these findings and our one-in-three figure has two possible explanations. Perhaps younger children are less likely to express these worries than the older teenagers and young adults included in the other two surveys. More disquieting, there may be many children who are carrying these worries around but haven't found an opportunity to talk to their parents about them. Further awareness and understanding about climate anxiety in children and youth can help us identify the best strategies to reduce anxiety.

Additionally, we find a gap between parents who said children need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world (82%) and just 49% who said that they had talked with their children about climate change.

These findings are similar to a 2019 survey from NPR/Ipsos [↔](#) which showed that 84% of parents—including two of three Republicans and 9 in 10 Democrats—and 86% of teachers believe children should learn about climate change. This previous poll showed just 45% of parents indicated speaking to their children about climate change. And only 45% of teachers said they were teaching it in schools.



# This survey highlights the opportunity to support children and youth in action on climate change

This survey, in conjunction with previous surveys, highlights the opportunity to bring people together in considering the needs of children and youth when advancing action on climate change.

Engaging in dialogue and learning about climate change connected to solutions at home and in school can help children and youth, not only by reducing anxiety but also by developing knowledge, skills, and agency to succeed in the clean economy and advance a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable society.



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## Who we are

This Is Planet Ed  is an initiative of the Aspen Institute's Energy and Environment Program that intends to unlock the power of education as a force for climate action, climate solutions, and environmental justice to empower the rising generation to lead a sustainable, resilient, and equitable future. This Is Planet Ed works across early years, K-12, higher education, and children's media to build our societal capacity to advance climate solutions.

This paper was authored by Anya Kamenetz, an education journalist, author and senior advisor to This is Planet Ed.

Capita  is an independent, nonpartisan think tank with a global focus. Its purpose is to build a future in which all children and families flourish. Capita explores how the great cultural and social transformations of our day affect our youngest children (0-8 years old). It seeks to tackle the interrelated problems that prevent us from taking a holistic and effective approach to meeting the needs of children and families, particularly those furthest from opportunity. Capita is incubating the Childhood Climate Fund, an in-development global philanthropic vehicle focused at the intersection of early childhood development and climate change.

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## Find out more

Join the discussion @Capita\_Social and @ThisIsPlanetEd  
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